
V. NATURALIZATIONS

This section presents information on the number and characteristics of persons who naturalize in the United States, including naturalization rates for immigrants granted legal permanent residence in 1977 and 1982.

Naturalization refers to the conferring of U.S. citizenship, by any means, upon a person after birth. (See Appendix 3, p. A.3-7.) There are five ways of becoming a U.S. citizen: naturalization in a court ceremony; naturalization through an administrative hearing; derivation through the naturalization of parents; acquisition at birth abroad to citizen parents; and legislation conferring citizenship upon certain groups of persons (see Limitations of Data). As part of the naturalization process, applicants pledge an oath of allegiance to the United States, thereby renouncing allegiance to their former countries of nationality.

U.S. Naturalization Program

To naturalize, an immigrant must fulfill certain requirements set forth in the Immigration and Nationality Act concerning age, lawful admission, and residence in the United States. These general naturalization provisions specify that an alien must: be at least 18 years of age; have been lawfully admitted to the United States for permanent residence; and have resided in the country continuously for at least 5 years. Additional requirements include the ability to speak, read, and write the English language; knowledge of the U.S. government and U.S. history; and good moral character. In 1997, immigrants naturalizing under the general provisions accounted for 96 percent of those for whom the nationality law provision was reported. (Provision of the law was not reported for 11 percent of naturalizations.)

The special provisions of naturalization law exempt aliens from one or more of the requirements of the general provisions. Spouses and children of U.S. citizens and military classes constitute the main categories of special naturalization. The majority of people naturalizing as spouses of U.S. citizens may do so in 3 years rather than the 5 years prescribed under the general provisions. Of all new citizens in 1997 with naturalization law provision reported, 4 percent naturalized under the special provisions. Children who immigrate with their parents generally do not apply to naturalize, but derive U.S. citizenship through the naturalization of their parents. Children adopted by U.S. citizens are eligible for administrative naturalization by the INS. These children may be naturalized in court ceremonies prior to reaching

age 18—there are no residency requirements. Under certain conditions, aliens who served honorably during war time and other conflicts may naturalize without prior admission to permanent resident status. Also, they need not have resided in the United States for a particular length of time. Aliens with lawful permanent resident status who have served honorably in the Armed Forces of the United States also are entitled to certain exemptions from the general naturalization requirements.

Every applicant for naturalization (age 18 and over) must file an application, Form N-400 *Application for Naturalization*. All aliens filing these applications who meet the preliminary documentary requirements must be interviewed by INS officers to determine their eligibility to naturalize. During the interview the officer discerns the applicant's knowledge and understanding of the English language, as well as of the history and government of the United States. Recently, applicants have been allowed to take standardized tests that are used to determine knowledge and reading and writing capabilities. Those applicants found qualified are scheduled for an oath ceremony before a judge or district director.

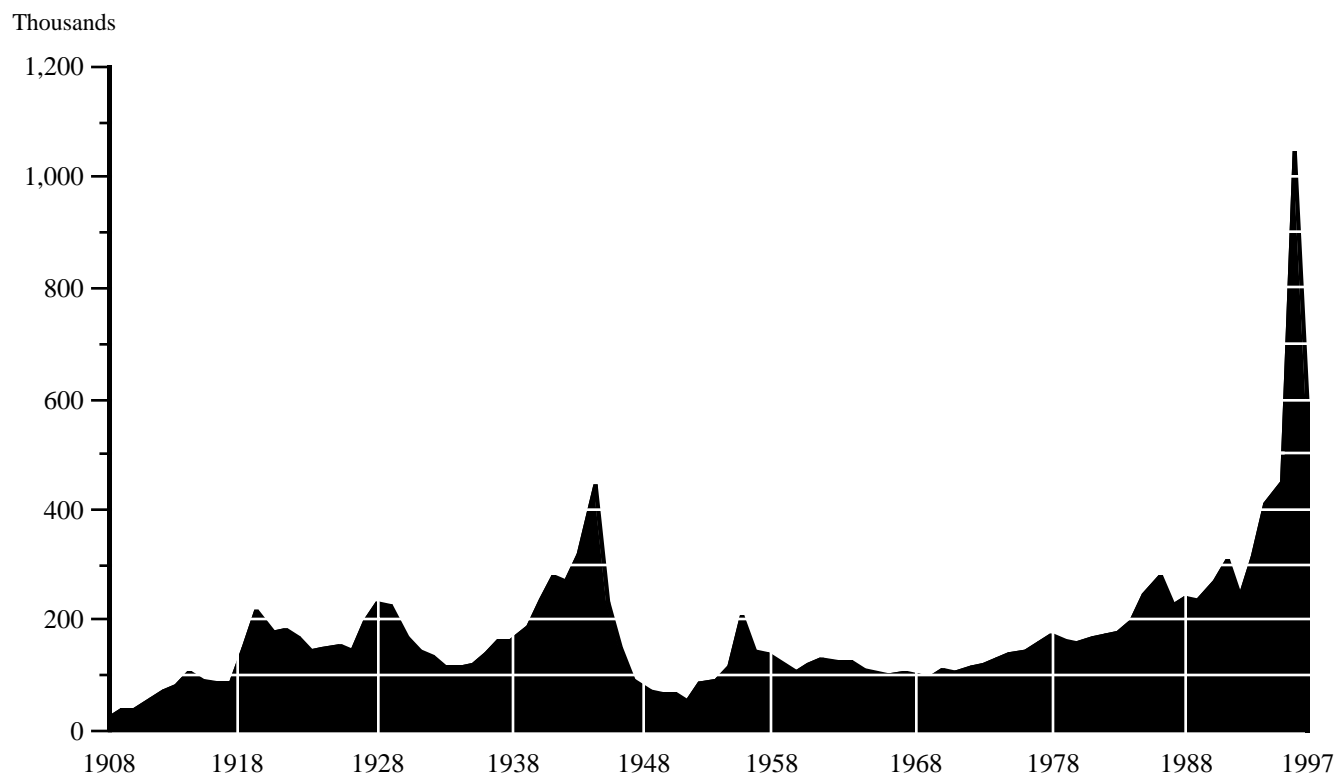
More than 598,000 people were naturalized during 1997.

Data Overview

A total of 598,225 persons were naturalized in fiscal year 1997. This number would have been much higher were it not for a backlog of more than one million applications pending a decision at the end of 1997. As a consequence, caution should be exercised in drawing conclusions from these data about recent trends in naturalization and in the characteristics of persons naturalizing.

Despite the backlog, the number of naturalizations in 1997 was the second highest in U.S. history, following the all-time record of 1,044,689 in 1996. Until 1994, the annual number of persons naturalizing had never exceeded 400,000 except during World War II in 1944 (Chart N).

Chart N
Persons Naturalized: Fiscal Years 1908-97



Source: 1987-97, Table 45; 1908-86, previous *Yearbooks*.

The increase in naturalizations during the 1990s is attributable to a number of factors:

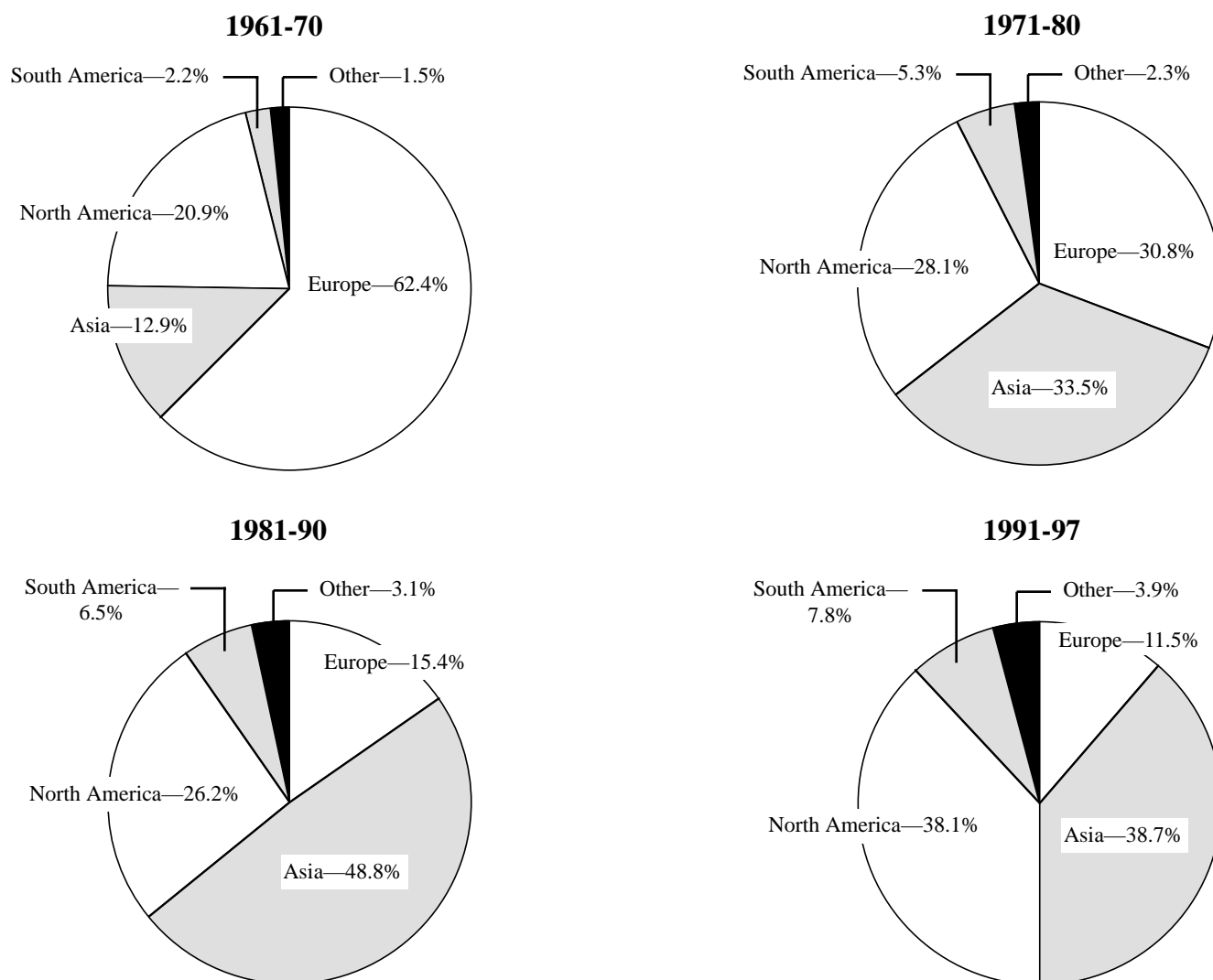
- ◆ In fiscal year 1992, the INS initiated a “Green Card Replacement Program”, which by requiring long-term permanent residents to replace their permanent resident alien cards with new, more counterfeit-resistant cards, led some to naturalize instead.
- ◆ In 1994, the first of the 2.68 million illegal aliens who were granted legal permanent resident status under the provisions of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986 became eligible to naturalize.
- ◆ During 1994-96, legislation was passed restricting public benefits for non-citizens, including Proposition 187 in California in 1994, and the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act in 1996.
- ◆ In 1995, the INS implemented the Citizenship USA initiative, which was designed to streamline the naturalization process and greatly increased naturalizations during 1996.

Region and country of birth (*Tables 47 and 53*)

The number of persons naturalizing each year lags behind the number immigrating by at least five years due to the five-year residency requirement for naturalization for most legal immigrants. Until the 1970s, the majority of persons naturalizing were born in Europe because country quotas in immigration law favored those countries. The regional origin of persons immigrating and naturalizing shifted from Europe to Asia following the elimination of the country quotas in amendments to the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) of 1965 and the arrival of Indochinese refugees in the 1970s. Asian immigrants also had historically higher rates of naturalization than Europeans. Between 1976 and 1995, Asia was the leading region of birth among persons naturalized.

Increases in legal immigration from North American countries, especially from Mexico, following the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, eroded Asia’s share of naturalizations. During the 1991-97 period, the proportion of persons naturalizing who were born in Asian countries fell to 38.7 percent, while the proportion from North America climbed to 38.1 percent (Chart O). North America became the leading region of birth of persons naturalizing in 1996. In 1997, nearly one-half

Chart O
Persons Naturalized by Decade and Selected Region of Birth: Fiscal Years 1961-97



Source: 1997, Table 53; 1961-96, previous *Yearbooks*.

(45.8 percent) of new citizens were born in North America compared to 32.4 percent in Asian countries and 11.3 percent in Europe.

Mexico was the leading country of birth of persons naturalizing in 1997 with 142,569 or 23.8 percent of the total. Other major countries of birth for naturalizing citizens were Vietnam (36,178), the Philippines (30,898), India (21,206), the Dominican Republic (21,092), the People's Republic of China (20,947), and Jamaica (20,253).

Immigration Reform and Control Act

Aliens legalized under IRCA accounted for 136,482 naturalizations, or 22.8 percent of all naturalized citizens,

in 1997. The majority of IRCA legalized aliens who naturalized (59.1 percent) were born in Mexico. The total number of IRCA legalized aliens who had naturalized by the end of 1997 stood at 431,311, or 16 percent of the total 2.68 million.

Years in immigrant status

The median number of years of residence in immigrant status (years between immigration and naturalization) was 8 years in 1997, down from 9 years in 1996 and 1995. Median years of immigrant residence was 7 years for naturalizing citizens born in Africa, 8 for Asians, 8 for Europeans, 9 for South Americans, and 8 years for North Americans (Table I). Median years of residence for IRCA legalized aliens was 7 years in 1997, the same as in 1996.

Table I
Median Years of Residence by Year of Naturalization and Region of Birth:
Selected Fiscal Years 1965-97

Region of birth	1997	1990	1985	1980	1975	1970	1965
Persons naturalized	8	8	8	8	7	8	7
Europe	8	10	9	10	8	9	7
Asia	8	7	7	7	6	6	6
Africa	7	7	7	7	6	6	6
Oceania	10	10	8	8	7	9	8
North America	8	11	13	11	9	7	9
South America	9	9	8	9	10	7	7

For non-IRCA immigrants, the median years of residence before naturalization decreased from 12 years in 1996 to 10 years in 1997.

Understanding the Data

Data Collection

The INS compiles two types of data on naturalizations: workload statistics and demographic statistics on the characteristics of persons who naturalize. Workload data include the number of naturalization applications received, the number of petitions filed, and the number of aliens approved for naturalization during a fiscal year.

Demographic data come from the naturalization application and include: date and country of birth, gender, marital status, state and metropolitan area of residence, occupation, date of admission for permanent residence, and section of naturalization law. These data are obtained from either an automated case tracking system in operation in the larger INS offices, manually coded records from the smaller offices, and, if not otherwise available, from the Central Index System (CIS) of INS.

Limitations of Data

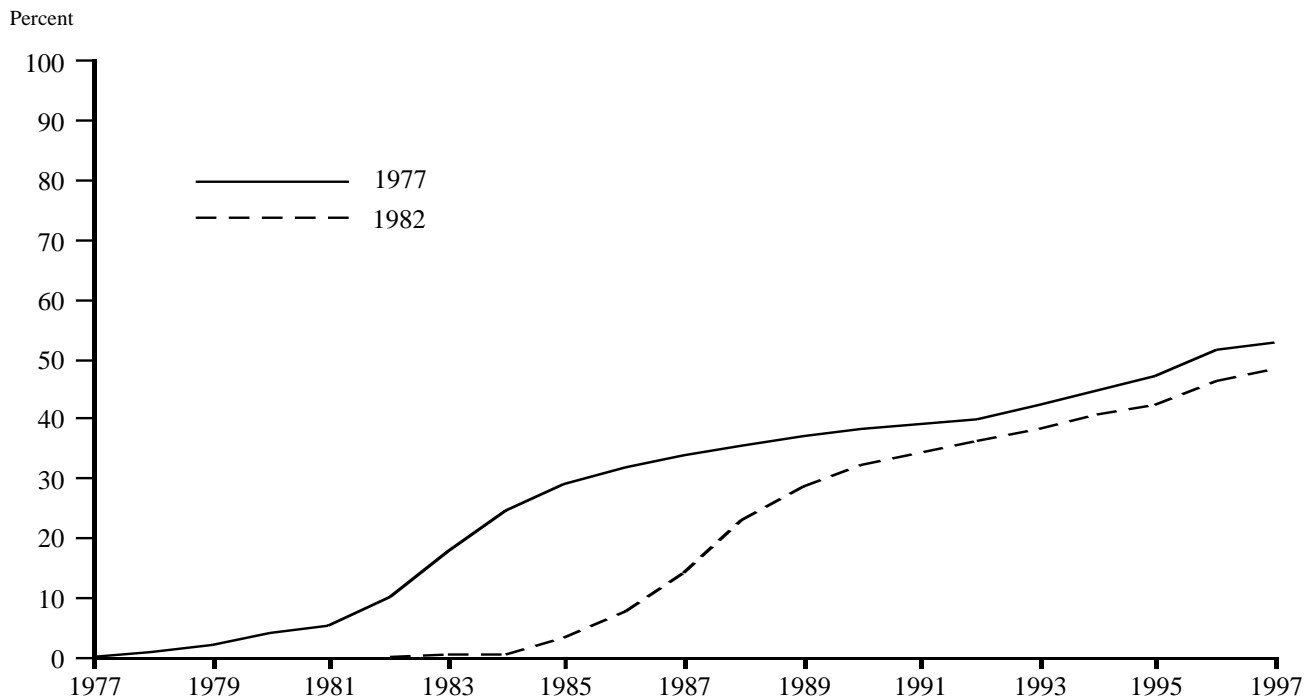
The 1997 naturalization data understate the demand to naturalize because of the backlog of applications pending a decision. The demographic characteristics of aliens whose cases were in the backlog are unknown.

In addition, the number of cases with missing data was higher in 1996 and 1997 than in previous years. This is because the Central Index System (CIS), the source of data

for about 100,000 cases in 1996 and about 60,000 cases in 1997, does not maintain information on state and metropolitan area of intended residence, marital status, occupation, provision of naturalization law, country of former allegiance, and in some instances, gender. In 1996, cases with information supplied by the CIS came from areas where INS offices use manual coding systems, that is primarily states and metropolitan areas with low concentrations of immigrants. No single demographic characteristic has been associated with the 1997 cases from the CIS.

In general, naturalization data compiled by the INS are limited to permanent residents who have naturalized in court ceremonies or at administrative hearings. The data collected for the *Statistical Yearbook* are restricted, with few exceptions, to persons ages 18 and over who apply for naturalization (Form N-400). Included in the totals are small numbers of children who derive or acquire citizenship through their parents who request a certificate of citizenship (Form N-600). Parents are not required to apply for the certificate of citizenship, so many of the children who derive or acquire citizenship are not in the *Yearbook* data. Children adopted by U.S. citizens may be naturalized before age 18 upon parental request for a certificate of citizenship in behalf of an adopted child (Form N-643) and administration of the oath of allegiance. Aliens who become U.S. citizens through the legislative process also are not covered in data collected by the INS. A recent example of the legislative procedure occurred upon the dissolution of the Trust Territory of the Pacific through which the Northern Mariana Islands became a commonwealth of the United States, making its residents U.S. citizens.

Chart P
Cumulative Naturalization Rates Through Fiscal Year 1997 of Immigrants
Admitted in Fiscal Years 1977 and 1982



Naturalization Rates

While every immigrant admitted for legal permanent residence to the United States has the right to naturalize after fulfilling the requirements, large numbers never become citizens. The Immigration and Naturalization Service has been following the naturalization experiences of two immigration-year cohorts, those of 1977 and 1982, in order to calculate their naturalization rates and identify some of the factors associated with naturalization. The immigrant records for these two cohorts have been matched against naturalization records through 1997. While the naturalization patterns of the 1977 and 1982 cohorts may not be representative of all immigrants, they provide some insights about the decision to become a U.S. citizen.

The data are restricted to immigrants who were 16 years and over in the year they became legal permanent residents. The subsequent citizenship of children may not be reflected in the data because children under 16 may automatically derive U.S. citizenship based on the naturalization of their parents without having a record created for them at the INS.

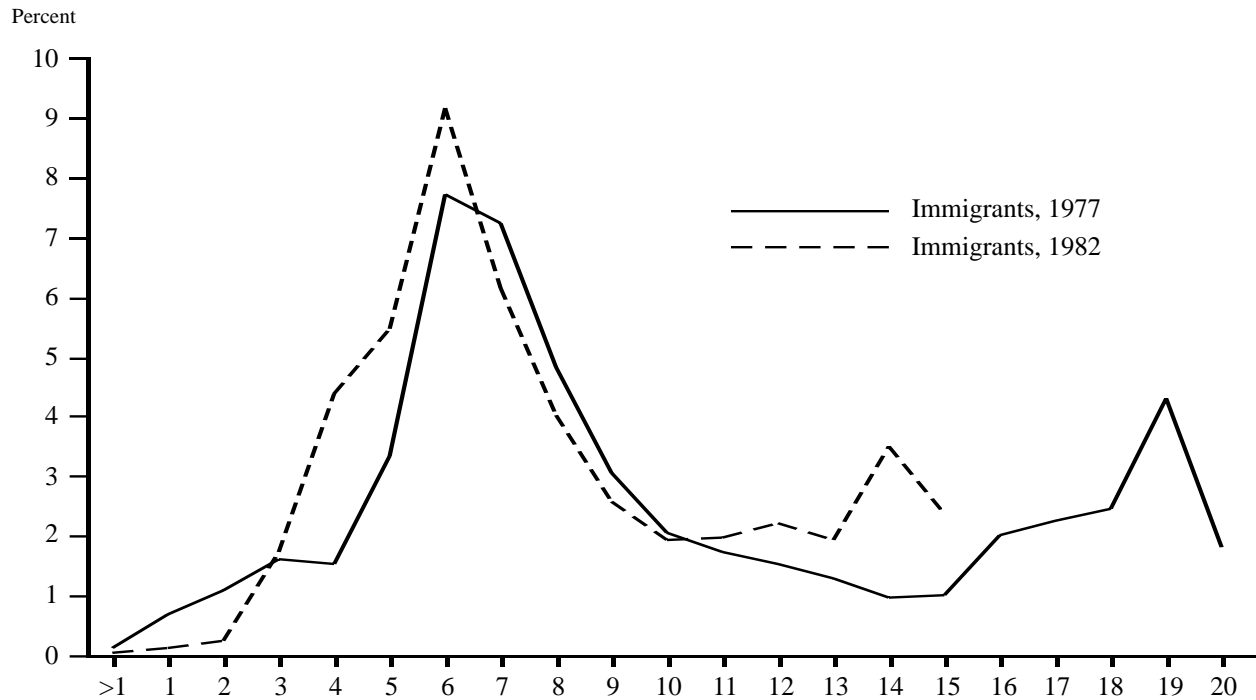
The two cohorts are similar in demographic composition by gender, age, marital status, and occupation and differ

somewhat by country of birth and class of admission. Cuban-born immigrants represent a higher proportion of the 1977 than 1982 cohort (16 percent vs. 2 percent) while immigrants from Vietnam and other Southeast Asian countries of Laos and Cambodia represent a higher proportion of the 1982 compared to 1977 cohort (18 percent vs. 1 percent). In addition, family and employment preference immigrants accounted for a greater proportion of the 1982 than the 1977 immigrant cohort (42 percent vs. 32 percent) because, up until 1978, few preference visas were available for Western Hemisphere immigrants.

Data Overview

As Chart P shows, 53 percent of the 1977 immigrant cohort and 48 percent of the 1982 cohort had naturalized by the end of 1997. The naturalization rate of the 1982 cohort exceeded that of the 1977 cohort by an average of about 4 percentage points after the fourth year following immigration. The upper limit on the cohort naturalization rates is unknown because data are not collected on the emigration and mortality experience of legal immigrants. Emigration alone might reduce the size of each cohort by roughly 30 percent (see Emigration section). For both cohorts, naturalizations peaked during the 6th year following admission for legal permanent residence, one

Chart Q
Years between Immigration and Naturalization of Immigrants Admitted in
Fiscal Years 1977 and 1982



year after the maximum residency requirement had been met (Chart Q). The annual number of naturalizations declined between the 7th and 14th year for 1977 immigrants and between the 7th and 10th year for 1982

immigrants, that is until the early 1990s. Subsequent increases in annual naturalizations reflect previously mentioned factors, including legislative efforts to restrict public benefits for non-citizens.

Table J
Naturalization Rates Through Fiscal Year 1997 of Immigrants Admitted in
Fiscal Years 1977 and 1982 by Year

Characteristics	1977	1982	Characteristics	1977	1982
Total, 16 years and over	352,070	447,766			
Percent naturalized	52.8	48.2	Employment preference	64.6	53.0
Age:			Refugee/Asylee	62.6	62.1
16-34 years	57.8	53.5	Other	47.0	49.4
35-54 years	56.3	45.1	Occupation:		
55 years and over	28.1	23.8	Professional, managerial,		
Gender:			sales, administrative		
Female	52.2	49.3	support	60.4	54.6
Male	53.2	47.4	Precision production,		
Class of admission:			machine operators,		
Family preference/			laborers, fabricators	53.1	42.8
immediate relative of			Service workers	52.9	48.3
U.S. citizen	50.8	42.6	Other workers	30.4	38.4
			Nonworkers	49.2	47.9

Table K
Naturalization Rates Through Fiscal Year 1997 of Immigrants Admitted in
Fiscal Year 1977 by Selected Country of Birth

Country of birth	Immigrants in 1977 ¹			Country of birth	Immigrants in 1977 ¹		
	Number admitted	Naturalizations through 1997	Rate ²		Number admitted	Naturalizations through 1997	Rate ²
All countries	352,070	185,742	52.8				
Cuba	57,023	34,932	61.3	Portugal	6,964	2,332	33.5
Philippines	31,686	20,766	65.5	Greece	6,577	2,371	36.0
Mexico	30,967	9,982	32.2	Colombia	6,138	3,757	61.2
Korea	19,824	12,839	64.8	Italy	5,843	1,272	21.8
India	15,033	9,713	64.6	Germany	4,899	930	19.0
China, People's Rep.	14,421	9,946	69.0	Soviet Union, former	4,535	3,108	68.5
Canada	9,000	1,969	21.9	Trinidad & Tobago	4,516	2,160	47.8
United Kingdom	8,981	2,343	26.1	Haiti	4,268	2,235	52.4
Dominican Republic	8,955	3,415	38.1	Guyana	4,115	2,576	62.6
Jamaica	7,896	4,104	52.0	Ecuador	4,063	1,918	47.2

¹ Ages 16 and over. ² Naturalizations through 1997 divided by the number of immigrants admitted.

The cumulative naturalization rates through 1997 by selected characteristics at the time of immigration for each cohort are displayed in Table J. The very low naturalization rates for older immigrants are probably due to mortality and a limited English fluency, which makes it difficult to pass some of the examinations for naturalization. In general, younger immigrants may be more likely to naturalize than older immigrants because of stronger ties to the U.S. through experiences in school, the workplace, and with friends. Young immigrants may naturalize sooner than older immigrants in order to take advantage of the right of citizenship to sponsor family members, especially spouses, for immigration.

Refugees and asylees tend to have higher naturalization rates than other categories of immigrants because of weakened or severed ties to their country of origin. Employment preference immigrants, probably because of higher levels of education and income, are more likely to naturalize than family preference immigrants or immediate relatives of U.S. citizens.

Region and country of birth are also associated with differences in naturalization rates. Immigrants from distant regions, such as Asia and Africa, or from countries with large numbers of refugees, including Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia, have tended to have higher

naturalization rates than immigrants from either Western Europe or with adjacent borders (Canada and Mexico). Tables K and L display the 20 countries that were the largest sources of immigrants aged 16 or older in the 1977 and 1982 cohorts, respectively, with the corresponding numbers who have naturalized through 1997 and their naturalization rates.

For the 1977 cohort (Table K), naturalization rates range from a high of 69.0 percent for immigrants from the People's Republic of China to a low of 19.0 percent for German immigrants. For the 1982 cohort (Table L), all of the countries with above average naturalization rates are Asian, except for the former Soviet Union and Guyana. Among 1982 immigrants, naturalization rates are highest for the Taiwanese (73.7 percent) and lowest for Germans (12.2 percent).

Limitations of Linked-Records Method

This analysis is based on a match between immigrant and subsequent naturalization records for individuals who became legal immigrants in 1977 and 1982. Errors in either record may prevent a successful match, so some people who did naturalize may be classified as not having done so. Record errors may also result in false matches, and efforts have been made to eliminate them.

Table L
Naturalization Rates Through Fiscal Year 1997 of Immigrants Admitted in
Fiscal Year 1982 by Selected Country of Birth

Country of birth	Immigrants in 1982 ¹			Country of birth	Immigrants in 1982 ¹		
	Number admitted	Naturalizations through 1997	Rate ²		Number admitted	Naturalizations through 1997	Rate ²
All countries	447,766	215,963	48.2				
Vietnam	49,721	35,331	71.1	United Kingdom	11,325	2,248	19.8
Mexico	41,929	9,051	21.6	Iran	9,231	5,742	62.2
Philippines	36,015	23,565	65.4	Cambodia	8,921	4,737	53.1
China, People's Rep.	23,409	13,470	57.5	Canada	7,787	1,226	15.7
Korea	23,000	9,794	42.6	Taiwan	7,304	5,383	73.7
Laos	22,480	9,998	44.5	Cuba	6,955	3,103	44.6
India	17,902	8,890	49.7	Haiti	6,904	3,082	44.6
Jamaica	13,213	5,366	40.6	Guyana	6,800	4,224	62.1
Dominican Republic	12,951	3,989	30.8	Colombia	6,637	3,200	48.2
Soviet Union, former	11,837	8,291	70.0	Germany	5,707	696	12.2

¹ Ages 16 and over. ² Naturalizations through 1997 divided by the number of immigrants admitted.